

Chamber of Reflection by EvieSmallwood

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Summary:

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He isn't sure when it started, but he's glad it did.

Chamber of Reflection

Author's Note:

- For [RevolutionariesDontWearPlaid \(GhostGrantaire\)](#).

This is something that I've been desperate to get down. I'm dedicating it to Emma, who loves all things Steve & OT3 (just like me). Hope you enjoy, babe!

Forward:

He isn't sure when it started; this thing between them. It might have been with the blows—heated, forceful (driven with a passionate intensity, a cocktail of envy and hatred and something else). It might have been before, in crowded hallways. Or after, with flashing lights and fire.

He isn't sure when it started, but he's glad it did.

December, 1984:

She's sitting in front of the Christmas tree with her legs folded beneath her, gazing at the twinkling lights with a sort of child-like fascination. She looks more vulnerable than he's ever seen her. He realises, suddenly, that this is what she must have looked like far before he knew her; at six, at eight, and maybe even at twelve (though by then, the magic and wonder of the holidays must have been fading, because Nancy Wheeler is nothing if not logic-driven).

Jonathan knew her then, but he knows that they were never really friends before it all. He doesn't feel envious anymore; he's hers, she's his, and that's the way it is now. Steve is stuck somewhere between there and gone—occasionally wanted and a complete nuisance.

At least, he thinks so.

She turns to him, and he expects her eyes to darken. He expects to see the stormy turmoil reflected in those cool blue irises with which he's become so familiar, but all he sees is softness. She's glowing, face illuminated with pink and red and gold. She's *angelic*.

He's nothing if not in love with Nancy Wheeler.

She says his name, and he watches the way her lips twinge upward ever-so-slightly. It makes his heart pound, because it's so familiar yet so foreign at the same time.

This is the way she used to look at him, before '83; when she would catch his eye in gym, or in their English class (or had it been History?). Everything about her then seems so different to the girl he knows now. Back then, she had been a whole thing. An untainted, un-maimed girl from suburbia, whose only worries were Chemistry tests and getting caught staring at the rich boy.

This Nancy, the one sitting in front of him with her head cocked, is a shadow of her former self. She's shrouded in darkness, and she's seen too much. There will always be an echo of brokenness in her eyes. There will be for each of them.

"I didn't know you would be here," she says.

"I was dropping off Dustin," he explains. He doesn't want to get into semantics. He doesn't want to tell her that he'd picked Dustin up from the arcade, and the kid had been crying his eyes out. Not because of some stupid thing his friends had done, or because Lucas was with Max, but because it was Christmas time and his father was dead.

There was always more to Dustin than met the eye, and so Steve had taken him in his arms and let him cry all over his jacket (his expensive Member's Only jacket)—but it didn't matter that the thing costed so much and it didn't matter that it was still covered in a bit of snot; all that mattered was Dustin feeling better.

It had taken some ice cream and a pep talk, but Steve feels like they're on the right track again.

He doesn't tell her any of this. He doesn't even know if he wants to, or if he can. He doesn't know what sort of talking is allowed between the two of them these days. Up until this point, he hadn't been sure they'd ever speak again.

He's glad he was wrong.

Nancy nods. Her gaze shifts to the window. It's snowing softly outside, and with the crackle of the fire and the dim multicoloured light, Steve feels more at peace in this house than he ever has anywhere else. Even with the silence, it's not awkward. He doesn't think it could ever get awkward between them; after fighting and nearly dying and seeing almost every side of her, after memorising her like the back of his hand, there will always be a familiar comfort to Nancy. She will always be, in some way, his home.

"I should go," he says, shifting a little.

Nancy nods again, not looking at him. He might be crazy, but he thinks she's crying a little. "Yeah," she says, even though they both know in their hearts she means 'no'. "Merry Christmas, Steve."

He tries for a smile, taking in her misty eyes and firmly set jaw. "Merry Christmas, Nancy."

January, 1985:

It's been two weeks since New Year's. Two weeks since he'd stood around at a party with a bunch of people he didn't know, some blonde slung over his arm, who'd kissed him too hard when the clock struck twelve.

He'd spent those two weeks in a stupor; laying around in bed, drunk from leftover champagne or too tired to even think much. It had ended with the kids swarmed around his California King bed, slapping his face and threatening to dump ice on him if he didn't shape up.

If *he* didn't shape up. Like *they* were the adults here.

It'd pissed him off enough to get up and shower. That anger had

turned into endearment when he'd found them all in his normally cold and vacant kitchen making macaroni and cheese and yelling over the television.

For the first time in years, his house hadn't felt so lonely.

And so the first time he sees them—really sees them together, they're leaning up against Jonathan's piece of shit LTD. They're both smoking.

Nancy doesn't really smoke. He's seen her do it once or twice, when things are too stressful school-wise or her dad is 'spending the night in the city because of work'. The first time he'd caught her at it had been behind the gym, a Slim between her fingers. He'd watched her for a minute, watched the smoke curl around her face, and then called her name.

The cigarette had been dropped into the gravel and scuffed over with a leather shoe.

Steve hadn't really gotten it, while they'd been dating; the way she had perfected herself for him. He doesn't get it until now.

He supposes it's the cigarette that makes it click, but it could be the bags under her eyes—perfectly clear against her makeup-barren skin—or the slightly worn but still pink sweater.

She looks fucking gorgeous. It's not because he can't have her, or because he's never really seen her this way; it's just because she's her. It's a definitive fact, at this point. It should go down in a science textbook.

Him, though. There's always been something about Jonathan Byers that he can't put his finger on.

Until now.

He's smiling. Steve has never seen that, not full-on. He's caught half-glimpses, small smirks, and a mouth behind a hand. Maybe he hides it because it ruins the image (if an image is what he's going for, but it could just be a happy accident). The image of gloomy, angst-riddled Jonathan Byers is absolutely *destroyed* with that smile.

“Aren’t you two a pair,” he finds himself saying. It’s not antagonistic or sarcastic; but genuine admiration. They really look good together.

Nancy doesn’t bother putting out the cigarette. Instead she takes a drag, cheeks sucked inward, and looks him up and down. It’s not belittling. If he weren’t so sure that she’s utterly moved on, he’d think she might actually be checking him out. “Hey,” she says.

“Hey yourself,” he replies. It’s easy. It’s natural. It’s like putting on his favourite pair of shoes and going for a run.

“Are you going to Marissa’s party?” Jonathan asks.

Jonathan asks *him*. Jonathan *speaks to him*. Jonathan *meets his eyes*.

Steve goes a little cold. He blinks, but then forces his lips to quirk upward because he doesn’t want Jonathan to take it the wrong way, like he’s not worthy of speaking to Steve because of social hierarchy or some shit. “Nah,” he slips his hands into the pockets of his too-tight jeans. “I’m taking the munchkins to the movies.”

“The munchkins?” Nancy inquires, with a raised eyebrow, lips curling upward.

“There’s five of them, they’re about yay high,” he gestures to his shoulder area.

“Wait,” Nancy’s brows furrow. A little crease erupts on her forehead. “You’re taking five of them? How do they fit in your car?”

He feels his cheeks flame a little. He rubs the back of his neck. “Well, you know... we make it work...”

She’s rolling her eyes and shaking her head, which makes him feel a little insecure about the whole situation. Usually, Will can squeeze in with the others on the back seat (given the boys are all so damn lanky). It’s not too dangerous. They double buckle.

He says this to Nancy, who outright laughs. In a weak sort of moment, Steve glances at Jonathan for support, and only finds him smirking and looking between the two of them.

When did it get this? When had it become easy?

“Just don’t kill our brothers,” Jonathan says.

“You have my permission to brutally murder me if that happens,” Steve says, actually meaning it.

Nancy shrugs. It leaves him standing there like a fish out of water. The piece that doesn’t belong. The scrap.

“Okay, well, I’m gonna go,” he runs a hand through his hair, feeling the easiness melt away. It’s replaced with nervousness. He can almost sense it; rolling off of all three of them in tidal waves.

He swallows and then turns, heading toward his car.

“Steve!”

He pauses and lets himself look back—just over his shoulder. Nancy has stepped away from Jonathan a little. There’s a sort of desperation about her, but he can’t quite discern where it comes from. “Do you—um... do you want to hang out with us? At Jonathan’s?”

Steve forgets how to speak. It’s only temporary, but in the time of his struggle he catches the way her shoulders have tensed and her face has gone red.

There’s something so beautiful about her, then; rosy cheeks standing out against pallid skin, hair tangled and curly and soft. He knows it smells like jasmine, because that’s the shampoo her grandmother used and it makes her feel nostalgic. He can’t say no to Nancy Wheeler.

So he says yes, and when he does it comes out a little like a startled yelp. It makes Jonathan jump. Steve sucks in a sharp breath. “Uh, when?”

“Tomorrow,” she replies, hope visibly kindling behind her eyes. “Six okay?”

“Six is great,” he says.

They watch Casablanca at Nancy's insistence. It feels almost unnatural, sitting between them on Jonathan's old couch; so when Nancy gets up to go to the bathroom, he goes for a soda and takes her spot.

He notices the way Jonathan tenses after that, occasionally glancing at him. That continues through the rest of the movie—his fidgeting, his wariness.

Nancy doesn't seem to mind, though; she curls up between them, eyes glued to the screen. It's the first semblance of a good feeling, sitting like that.

By the end of it, Nancy is clutching a Kleenex to her chest. She doesn't use it to wipe away her tears, though. She lets those fall. They look crystalline with the glow of the screen.

Once upon a time, Steve had used to kiss them away—back when those tears had been for Barb or her brother. He's glad that she can shed them for something like a movie now. He's glad that the mourning period seems to have finally passed.

After the credits roll, they turn on the lights. Jonathan busies himself with collecting cans and empty popcorn bowls, leaving Steve alone with Nancy.

She straightens the cushions, rewinds the VHS, and goes about her business like she knows this place. The disorienting thing about it is that she does. She doesn't have to ask where the bathroom is, or check to see if it's okay to drink the cherry soda.

"Why am I here?"

He doesn't really know why he asks. Maybe it's because Jonathan is doing dishes, or because he truly is confused as to what the hell the point of this is.

She looks up, lips parted in surprise. "I miss you," she replies, almost like it's obvious. He supposes that it is. "Don't you miss me?"

"Of course," is the first thing out of his mouth, because dear God does he miss her; it's like living without a limb. He doesn't know how he

managed before her, but once he knows how good life can be, it doesn't seem worth living without her.

Sometimes, he amends mentally, because that seems drastic somehow.

"Well, then I don't see a problem."

"The problem is that I can't stand sitting here knowing I can't... That I'm not..."

"But what if you could be?"

He doesn't understand what she means, but her words send shivers down his spine anyway. Suddenly he's on his feet, reaching for his jacket. It's an automatic reaction to whatever prospect she's proposing. "I have to—"

"Steve, wait—"

"It's late—"

"Steve, please, just—"

He doesn't catch the rest of it. The door shuts behind him, isolating the rest of her sentence inside. Keeping him out.

He runs to his car, and this time he doesn't look back. He's afraid of what he might see; flashing lights, or her.

March, 1985:

The days pass by in a blur. They're mostly occupied by school work, college applications, and those damned kids—dragging him to and fro in Hawkins, filling his ears with dragon lore, and chewing too much bubble gum.

It's on a Saturday morning that his axis shifts. He's dropping them off at the arcade, half tempted to run in with them. They push each other and yell and tease, and it's adorable to him in some way. Most days he feels like a doting mom, and he isn't quite sure where he learned that from. Certainly not *his* mom.

One of them comes rushing back though. Will stops in front of Steve, who's leaning against his hood, finishing his smoke. The kid's cheeks are flushed from the cold. He still hasn't sprouted up yet (and a part of Steve hopes he never will). "Forget something, kiddo?"

Will bites his lip, pulls something out of his pocket, and hands it to Steve.

It's a cassette tape.

"That's for you," Will says.

Steve stares down at it, taps it against his palm, and grins. "Thanks, little Byers," he says.

Will blushes. That's sort of funny to Steve, who's never really had anyone but girls blushing at him. The pieces fall into place slower than they should have. *Oh. Of course.*

His smile fades, but then he's reaching forward and ruffling the kid's hair just as he takes off. Steve watches him go. He feels both anxious and protective. On one hand, he isn't really sure how to handle it. He's never met anyone... like that. Well... Well, maybe that's not true. But it's been a long, long time.

Kindergarten, lunch time, behind the shrubs. Lucas Peterson had kissed him right on the lips, and Steve hadn't known enough to push him away.

He swallows hard, because that's not worth dwelling on. It's not as though he'd initiated it, anyway. He'd been a little kid.

But you did kiss him back. And you liked it. A lot.

He shakes his head and ducks into his car. Anything to distract himself with.

He slips the cassette into the player and leans back, letting the first song—some slow love ballad, oh Jesus—wash over him.

He hasn't thought of that kiss... maybe ever, since it happened. Or maybe one time, after a particularly rowdy dinner in which his dad

had griped and moaned about the “faggot working with him”. Steve had felt his skin crawl at the table, keeping his eyes on his plate. Later that night, he’d gone up to his room and remembered that kiss, and felt so ashamed he’d cried for an hour.

The song fades out, replaced with yet another love song. Steve lets it play for a few moments, bites his tongue, and then stops the tape. He pulls out of the arcade parking lot and drives the short distance to the Hawk.

Steve stops before he goes in, heart pounding loudly in his chest. It almost feels heavy, like it’s going to fall through his body. He ejects the tape from the player and then slips out of his car.

He isn’t sure what to do, and this whole situation isn’t necessary *bothering* him, but some advice might be helpful.

Jonathan is behind the counter, handing a soda to some little kid. Steve almost walks out, right back to his car, because dammit *what is with his chest*.

He wants to know—he needs to know—why his heart skips a beat when Jonathan smiles at that kid. He needs to know why even though all he wants to do is walk right out, his legs carry him straight to Jonathan like they’ve got a mind of their own. He needs to know why he feels so satisfied when Jonathan’s eyes widen at the sight of him, why he’s so quick to paint a smile across his lips. *No hostility here. Just general befuddlement.*

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself,” Jonathan replies.

Steve blinks, and then looks around. It’s empty, aside from them. Everyone’s packed in the auditoriums for the double feature. They’re alone.

“Alright,” he leans forward, across the counter. Jonathan doesn’t lean away. Jonathan has freckles on his nose and cheeks. Jonathan’s hair is glowing a little. “Let me level with you.”

“Okay,” he’s chewing his tongue. “What’s up?”

Steve sets the cassette tape on the counter. "What am I supposed to do when your kid brother hands me that? I mean, it's got love songs on it. One after the other. And... I just don't know how to deal with this."

Jonathan's face has gone pale, making those freckles stand out even more. He looks like a deer caught in the headlights. "Steve—"

"I have no problem with it," Steve says quickly. "I understand it. He's a kid, he's gonna do things like this. He has crushes, and it's normal. I just don't know what to do when it's *me*."

The shock on Jonathan's face practically snaps in half with his sudden grin. "So you caught onto that," he says.

"A little hard not to," Steve replies. "But I figured if an oblivious idiot like me figured it out, his own brother must already know."

Jonathan nods. He taps his fingers against the top of the tape, bones standing out beneath the skin of his hand. His fingers are long, skinny, and fast-moving. The veins in them stand out starkly, like frozen rivers running through a snow-covered forest. "You think Will made this for you?"

Steve's gaze snaps up. He feels a sudden rush of confusion and nervousness. "Well, yeah—?"

With ease, Jonathan flips the tape, showing a label Steve didn't even bother to look at. The writing on it is so thin it's barely there, scrawled in a pen that must have been almost dry.

To: Steve

From: Jonathan

The reaction is immediate; a heated face, non-verbal stuttering, and butterflies in his stomach. *Butterflies*. He hasn't gotten those since the last time he kissed Nancy.

"It was on my nightstand," Jonathan is saying. He sounds almost amused. "Will must have seen it, and I guess the little shit decided he wanted you to have it."

Steve realises he hasn't moved. His head snaps up, and Jonathan is right there. *Oh*. "Oh."

Jonathan nods. He's not so confident now that their eyes have met. He seems to be searching; maybe for anger, or disgust, or... whatever he wants. "Oh."

They're both quiet for a minute, processing, until Jonathan speaks. "Let me level with you," he says. "Nancy's still in love with you. That never stopped. I'd have to be an idiot to not know you feel the same," he takes a deep breath. "The thing is..."

He doesn't even say it. All it takes is their eyes meeting. He doesn't know how to react. He doesn't even know how he feels. He just knows that there's a vein that's about to burst in his neck and his knees are suddenly very, very weak.

He realises, pretty quickly, that he's nothing if not falling for Jonathan Byers.

It feels weird. He jerks away—away from their mingled breath; cigarette smoke and junior mints. Away from those freckles and those eyes and the untold promise that they each unknowingly made the night he ran back into that house.

The promise of it never being over between them. The promise of forever.

"Byers," he says.

"Harrington," Jonathan mimics.

Steve fiddles with his car keys. He can't walk away from this one. His feet won't work. "Do you...?"

"Come to my house tonight," Jonathan blurts. "I... we should talk about this, you know?"

Steve nods eagerly. "Yeah." He pauses. "Will Nancy be there?"

"Yeah. Definitely."

“Okay, then.”

Jonathan shrugs. “See you at ten.”

He walks out shaking.

It’s a wonder Steve doesn’t crash the car on his way over, it really is; his hands have never been more numb. The hours had ticked by so fucking *slowly*, leaving him agonising and contemplating.

He isn’t sure where this is going, but he knows he’s headed toward it. He isn’t sure how to stop that progression.

When he pulls into the Byers’ drive, he gives himself a minute. Nancy’s car is here—the brand new Chevy her parents bought her for her birthday in February.

He doesn’t know why he’s doing this. It doesn’t make any sense... and yet, he can’t say that just yesterday he wasn’t giving Jonathan Byers second thoughts. It seems like every waking hour has been consumed by him and Nancy for the last few months (years). They’re always in the back of his mind, like some sort of permanent buzzing. It’s exhausting and invigorating at the same time.

He gets out of his car, not for any other reason than ‘I might as well’. He knocks on the front door.

Nancy answers.

She’s wearing a sweater that’s drowning her. Her hair now reaches her shoulders. It’s curly, still—wild ringlets of bronze and brown. She somehow manages to take his breath away; maybe because it’s been too long since he’s last seen her. Maybe because she just does that to him.

“You came,” she says, sounding more than relieved. There’s a strain in her voice.

“Uh, yeah,” he sticks his hands in his pockets. “I don’t really know what the hell I’m doing, but yeah.”

She steps aside, and her eyes never leave his form as he walks in. The Byers house is warm and welcoming, not unlike last time—but somehow he's even more nervous.

Then she's taking his hand, and smiling, and telling him not to worry.

“Jesus fucking Christ, *really?*”

“Really,” Steve replies, taking another puff from the joint between his fingers. He starts to laugh, staring up at the haze of smoke that clouds the ceiling.

He's on his back, and he's pretty fucking high—the weed can't have been that expensive, considering Jonathan Byers purchased it, so he feels that the electricity of the situation is the main contributor to his elevated state.

They're all laughing. He doesn't even remember what they're laughing about. Something about his dad.

Nancy rolls over on the floor next to him. She puts her hand on his chest, and it stops his heart a little, which makes him laugh harder. “What?”

“Nothin’,” he shakes his head.

Jonathan slips off his bed. He leans over Steve. “Your hair is like...” he doesn't even finish. One hand reaches out and grabs a bit of Steve's hair, coiling it around a finger. He stares with fascination.

Steve stares right back. He sees the things he didn't let himself see sober; the way Jonathan's jaw is... chiselled. That's the word for it; just darkening with the beginnings of stubble. His eyes are sad, but alight with something... something intense.

He's so fucking gorgeous it turns Steve's world upside down.

It takes absolutely no effort to lean up and kiss him.

His lips are soft—not in the way Nancy's are, but soft because he chews them so much. They're warm. Steve doesn't even hesitate,

grabbing Jonathan by the back of the head and pulling him down a little so that his stomach isn't so strained. Jonathan melts into his touch like quick silver, folding against him. It's like coming home.

He rakes his fingers through Steve's hair and sighs, or maybe groans a little. It's a sound he's never really heard, but it's so fucking good.

When he pulls away (and Jesus Christ does that take effort), Jonathan doesn't look anywhere else. It's like a magnet drawn to its pair. Eyes on eyes, hearts pounding with fear and exhilaration.

He's intoxicating. This whole thing is.

Nancy is staring at them with wide eyes. "I... I didn't know it would feel that good," she says, a little breathless. "W-watching you do that."

Steve doesn't wait. He's grabbing her by the wrist and crashing his lips onto hers because it's been too fucking *long* since he's kissed Nancy Wheeler. And God, is it good. Her arms come up to coil around his neck and her form presses against his. Her lips part a little. God, is it *perfect*.

"Steve," she breathes, breaking away. She needs air. He does too, but he learned a long time ago that he'd give up breathing for one last kiss from her.

"Missed you," he says, mouth muffled against her neck.

All of the energy has been drained out of him. He slumps a little. Jonathan pries the joint from his fingers and drops it in a nearby cup of water. "So what is this, exactly, that we're doing here?"

Jonathan and Nancy exchange glances. He sees their triumph, their satisfaction, and knows immediately that this is something they've wanted. He imagines them tucked away in some dark corner of the school, discussing the best way to rope him into their romance.

Well, they hadn't had to rope him in after all; he'd come running.

"I don't know," Nancy says. She puts her hands on either side of his face. "Are you okay?"

There's a hand on his back. Jonathan. "Yeah," he nods. "Just... overwhelmed."

"You and me both," Jonathan says.

Steve reaches out and takes his hand. He doesn't really know what he's doing. He doesn't understand any of it, but it feels more right than anything has for a long time. It feels as right as running back, as throwing that lighter.

"Wanna go steady, Byers?"

The laugh he gets is good enough for all three of them.

December, 1985:

There are two heavy sleeping forms leaning against his sides, but he doesn't mind the weight; he'd carry them to the ends of the earth and back if he had to.

Some Frank Sinatra song is playing. The whole thing is making him drowsy—the music, the fire, the tree... He's never been so tired, he's sure of that.

Nancy stretches. She looks like a cat when she does it; arching her back and pointing her toes. Her eyes flutter open, and she meets his gaze with a smile. "Merry Christmas," she whispers.

"Merry Christmas," he replies. "How'd you sleep?"

She shrugs, sitting up. It'd only been for an hour; they'd watched an old movie and passed out. "Okay."

"I slept fine, if anyone cares," Jonathan mutters. His eyes are still closed.

"Ho fucking ho, Byers," says Steve.

Nancy erupts into a fit of giggling. She curls into herself, hair curtaining her face. Steve and Jonathan grin in unison.

There's something about this moment, about the way he's never felt better—in his own home, with the people he loves most...

He isn't sure when it started; this thing between them. It might have been with that kiss—timid, concentrated (driven with a passionate intensity, a cocktail of need and frustration and something else). It might have been before, in a darkened house. Or after, with hidden smiles and warm, complete nights.

He isn't sure when it started, but he's glad it did.

Author's Note:

Please comment if you enjoyed!